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Nuclear Testing and the Joint Task Force System

Roger A. Meade

During the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s, the United States conducted eight nuclear test operations in the far reaches of the Pacific Ocean.¹ These operations were possible only because of a military command and control organization, the joint task force. Commanded by the Army Navy, and Air Force on a rotating basis, each of the seven JTFs provided the means by which the thousands of ships, planes, material, and personnel were moved over thousands of miles of ocean.

The first task force, JTF-1, was created to test the destructive effects of the Fat Man bomb on Naval vessels at Bikini Atoll in the summer of 1946. Commanded by Vice Admiral William “Spike” Blandy, JTF-1 was a purely military operation supported by the MED. Never meant to be a permanent organization, JTF-1 was dissolved soon after completing its mission.

For Operation Sandstone, a new task force, JTF-7, was created to support the AEC and the proof testing of three new types of atomic bombs. Inserted into the task force chain of command were two civilian positions – a Test Director, who controlled all AEC activities, and a Scientific Director, who controlled and coordinated all technical operations. Both of these positions were nearly co-equal to that of the Task Force Commander, Army Lieutenant General John E. Hull. Although only Hull could give the order to fire, he had to have the consent of both the Test and Scientific Directors before doing so. JTF-7, like its predecessor, was dissolved shortly after completion of the operation.

JTF-3, created for the AEC’s Operation Greenhouse, did not have a Test Directory, whose function was divided between the Task Force Commander and the Deputy Commander for Scientific Operations. This change was significant because it set the precedent of delegating civilian control of nuclear devices, mandated by law, to the task force commander. This organizational structure held firm when, a year later, a third task force, JTF-132, was created for Operation Ivy.

Deciding that creating a new JTF for each test operation was not cost effective, the Joint chiefs of Staff created a standing task force, using again the JTF-7 designation, for all future operations beginning with the 1954 Castle test series. Army Major Percy Clarkson, who previously commanded the Ivy task force, became the first commander of JTF-7, the only flag officer to command two nuclear joint task forces.

The Navy assumed command of JTF-7 for Operation Redwing. The initial task force commander, Rear Admiral Charles “Swede” Momsen, upset the here-to-fore smooth military-civilian working relationship by requesting that “criminal jurisdiction over civilians in the Pacific Proving Ground be transferred to the military.” “Such a concentration of executive, legislative, and judicial power,” wrote Alvin Graves, “is contrary to American principles, especially since there were no serious inadequacies of the present jurisdictional arrangements.” Graves’ argument

¹ The Wigwam and Argus tests were not part of the JTF system.

persuaded the Chief of Naval Operations to let the issue die. Momsen was succeeded by Rear Admiral B. Hall (Red) Hanlon, who successfully carried out the operation.²

The Air Force commanded JTF-7 for the thirty-five tests of Hardtack I. Operating on both Bikini and Eniwetok Atolls, JTF-7 worked under the pressure of completing the large number of tests before an anticipated moratorium. After Hardtack I, JTF-7 remained in ready status, but was dissolved when it became apparent that there would be not a quick end to the moratorium.

The last joint task force, JTF-8, carried out Operations Dominic and Fishbowl. Dominic, conducted primarily at Christmas Island, was a series of air dropped weapon proof tests. Fishbowl, conducted at Johnston Atoll was a set of military high altitude effects tests. Very shortly after the last Fishbowl test, President Kennedy ended all atmospheric testing in the Pacific. With that announcement, JTF-8 was dissolved.

² Momsen to the Chief of Naval Operations, Criminal Jurisdiction over Civilians in the Pacific Proving Grounds, Trust Territory of the Pacific, 8 December 1954; Ralph Carlisle Smith to Alvin Graves, Criminal Jurisdiction over Civilians in the Pacific Proving Grounds, Trust Territory of the Pacific, March 12, 1954; and Alvin Graves to Paul W. Spain, Criminal Jurisdiction over Civilians in the Pacific Proving Grounds, Trust Territory of the Pacific, March 15, 1954. LANL Archives.

| Joint Task Force Designations | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|------|---|-------|-------------|------------------|------------------|
| Operation | Date | Commanding | JTF # | # Personnel | LASL Designation | UCRL Designation |
| Crossroads | 1946 | Navy Vice Admiral Blandy | 1 | 42,000 | na | na |
| Sandstone | 1948 | Army Lieutenant General Hull | 7 | 10,366 | 7.1.1 | na |
| Greenhouse | 1951 | Air Force Lieutenant General Quesada | 3 | 9353 | 3.1.1 | na |
| Ivy | 1952 | Army Major General Clarkson | 132 | 9300 | 132.1 | na |
| Castle | 1954 | Army Major General Clarkson | 7 | 10,110 | 7.1 | 7.12 |
| Redwing | 1956 | Navy Rear Admiral Hanlon | 7 | 10,450 | TU-1 | TU-2 |
| Hardtack I | 1958 | Air Force Major General Luedecke | 7 | 19,651 | 7.1.1 | 7.1.2 |
| Dominic/Fishbowl | 1962 | Army Major General Starbird | 8 | 25,309 | 8.1.1 | 8.1.2 |